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ABSTRACT

Buffalo Creek Elementary School in Houston, Texas, has been recognized for its success in serving its students--approximately 600 low-income Hispanic children in grades preK-5. A study of the school, which sought to develop a detailed picture of school effectiveness, identified 33 indicators of success. Each of these indicators is briefly described, but the overarching explanation of what makes Buffalo Creek an outstanding school is found in the quality of its teachers and principal. In addition to having much content knowledge (including Spanish and ESL) and much pedagogical knowledge, the staff has special expertise in the area of relationships. Every one of the success indicators is a function of the staff's ability to relate to the children, the parents, and each other. Also, the staff shares a common ideology of why the school exists, what is supposed to happen to the children, and their role as teachers (or principal) in making it happen. The Buffalo Creek staff is gifted at relationship skills, and this is the key. Studying Buffalo Creek leads to the conclusion that children in poverty must have teachers who can connect with them. The teachers' desire and ability to live with the children all day, every day, is prerequisite to the children's learning. (SV)

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Part 1 of a Series

ED 433 160

Victory at Buffalo Creek:

What Makes a School Serving Low-Income Hispanic Children Successful?

By Dr. Martin Haberman

The short answer is the quality of the teachers and the principal. The long answer deals specifically with what they do and the nature of the school climate they create.

The literature explaining school effectiveness for children in poverty is often alluded to in superficial ways. Experts seem to agree that effective schools have regular testing, a strong principal, high teacher expectations and parent support. Unfortunately, these rubrics also describe many urban poverty schools that are failing. Each week I visit middle schools which seem to have these four characteristics, but from which 60 percent of the students disappear before they enter or finish high school. What is needed in greater detail is what effectiveness looks like. What are the identifiable behavioral indicators that can be observed and assessed in a successful way? In this and the May issue of *Instructional Leader*, 33 such indicators are identified. Hopefully, this level of detail will begin to explain what actually leads to success in schools serving children in poverty. It should also become easier to improve less effective schools once there are clearer, more specific indicators to emulate.

The Setting

Buffalo Creek is an elementary school in Houston, Texas and is part of the Spring Branch Independent School District. It opened in 1997 to 586 children and currently serves 630 children in a typical PK-5 organization. The student body is 85 percent Hispanic, almost entirely of Mexican background. The free-lunch program includes 86 percent of the student body. Seventy-five percent of the children are bused.

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VIEWPOINT

Agreeing on common goals, and achieving them, means you get to share the joy of accomplishment. And that's sometimes a higher reward than one received from an individual effort.

— TOM LAMBERT

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"At Buffalo Creek, there are only a few initiatives, everyone buys into them and they are evaluated on an on-going basis."

The staff includes a full-time principal, assistant principal, school secretary, five custodians and 29 classroom teachers. The following specialists are also full-time: one art teacher, 1.5 music teachers, one physical education teacher, four special education teachers, a half-time math specialist, a half-time reading specialist, and two Reading Recovery teachers. There is also a full-time librarian, one social worker and one counselor. Part-time staff include six full-time teaching assistants. There are also six staff in food preparation who work eight hours per week.

The children attending the school were selected by creating boundary changes to relieve overcrowding in four surrounding schools. The teachers were all selected using the Urban Teacher Selection Interview. So, too, was the assistant principal. The principal is trained to interview using both the Urban Teacher Selection Interview and the Urban Principal Selection Interview.

What Is Buffalo Creek Successful?

The 33 indicators of this school's success have been gathered from direct observations, school records, speaking with the principal and staff, conducting formal interviews of staff, and reviewing written questionnaires of staff. These indicators are not grouped or summarized because grouping them changes their character. For example, several items related to having a "strong principal," but what exactly does that mean? The indicators of what the principal actually does – and doesn't do – involves more than being a "strong" principal. Some indicators are stated in two sentences. Others require a few paragraphs. A discussion of what might be learned from Buffalo Creek concludes this series.

Rising Achievement – After its first year of operation, the school was officially designated as "recognized." Ninety-seven percent of the children passed the TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills); 85 percent of the students passed the TAAS in reading while 81 percent of the students passed the TAAS in math.

Teachers' Children Attend – Other indicators of the school's success are even more compelling. Eight teachers have their own children attending the school. These children were enrolled prior to the achievement test results reported above. In the city where I live, there are approximately 6,500 teachers and over 100,000 students. I know of no school where teachers enroll their own children. Indeed, when specifically asked, a majority of our teachers state they would not send their children to the schools in which they teach.

Children's Needs Trump Schedule – An obvious indicator of school success relates to scheduling. Most of the extra things plus all the expected things that the staff at Buffalo Creek are willing and eager to do are done by teacher decision. In most urban school districts, teachers are required by union contract to leave the building at a common time: as early as 2:30 or 3 p.m. in some cities. Such an agreement which controls teacher practice would be inconceivable at Buffalo Creek. Teachers, staff, students, parents and administrators are free to make their own decisions about their preŸ nce in the building. Even more, the children's bus schedule it Óot an iron control over children staying after school for extra activities or additional help.

The fact that the staff at Buffalo Creek control their own time rather than being told when they must leave the building or cut the children's activities off is a source of empowerment for the faculty and staff. It is a truism in the world of work that those with greater control over their own time have higher status and receive greater recognition. This is especially true for teachers who must work within highly organized time schedules. At Buffalo Creek, it is a clear and agreed-upon principle of operation that the educational and human needs

of children and teachers will take precedence over even the time schedule. This is no mean feat. It is typical in most schools that the rigidities of the time schedule will trump any other consideration. For the Buffalo Creek faculty to be able to give numerous examples of how they make children's needs and their professional preferences a dominant factor over the time schedule is a clear indicator of their empowerment.

Identifiable Priorities – A clear indicator of this school's success deals with the absence of "projectitis." This is a common disease of schools in districts serving children in poverty. Every conceivable program is overlaid on a panoply of existing programs, none of which is ever implemented long enough to matter and none of which can be evaluated because of the contamination from all the other programs. *Where everything is special, nothing is.*

Even worse, the "regular" curriculum disappears. Most school districts serving poverty students ricochet from one priority to the next as short-term superintendents pass them. Projects and programs are adopted and dumped into schools because federal or state monies are available. Typically, teachers are barraged with "innovations." Their response cannot be one of hurling themselves wholeheartedly into the next initiative because there are simply too many. Indeed, many districts and individual schools adopt initiatives that require contradictory assumptions about how children learn and what constitutes teachers' best practice. It is understandable that even good teachers as well as burnouts will respond to endless initiatives with, "Don't get excited. This, too, shall pass." And they are usually right. In a year or two, the program, its advocates and the funds are likely to be gone.

In Buffalo Creek, there are only a few new initiatives, everyone buys into them and they are evaluated on an on-going basis. Buffalo Creek is implementing the Tribes program to combat school violence, a bilingual program and thematic teaching. Before the faculty would taken on any new initiative, they would consider its impact on these existing priorities. It is clear that the faculty and staff know what their priorities are and are sticking with them.

Effort as the Explanation for Success – An indicator of school success not typically used is how the faculty and administration account for their own success and that of the children. The Buffalo Creek staff are unanimous in their commitment to effort as the most powerful predictor of success. They do not buy into the ability paradigm. This ideology defines their work as teachers. They believe their job involves engaging learners, getting children to persist, being active and working hard. They use effort to explain their own successes and those of the principal and school staff. Such an ideology leads them to believe that if they do not reach a particular objective, they can do something about it. Their belief in the effort paradigm contributes to their feeling of empowerment; that the things they really value for the school are achievable.

Demonstrated Effort as the Basis for High Expectations – High expectations become realizable only as a result of the faculty and staff commitment to the effort paradigm. If the staff of a school were to state high expectations but believe in the ability paradigm, they would be stating a vacuous goal over which they had no control. If children's abilities were the cause of their school success, then teachers could be essentially unaccountable since acts of teaching, whatever they

“They (teachers) believe their job involves engaging learners, getting children to persist, being active and working hard.”

were, would not be the primary cause of children's learning, innate ability would. Buffalo Creek teachers assume *all* their children *will* learn because they feel accountable for generating students' effort and engaging them in learning.

The principal shares the teachers' commitment to student effort. She also explains teacher success and her own success using the effort paradigm. This means there is a logical and consistent basis by which all the Buffalo Creek staff explain their own, each other's and the children's success. To merely announce a belief in high expectations, place a high expectations flag on the building or have a logo printed on school stationery is not an implementation strategy. A commonly shared ideology held by 100 percent of the staff who buy into the effort paradigm (i.e., "Everyone who works will achieve and our job is to generate meaningful work.") will implement a program of school-wide high expectations.

Widespread Peer Teaching – An overall but clear indicator of school success is that the students believe their school is a learning community. The children themselves see learning as the school's primary activity and themselves as capable of realizing this goal. The behavioral indicator that most directly substantiates this student perception is their willingness to help each other. Cooperative learning is regularly practiced for some portion of time in all classrooms. A singular indicator of this student commitment is that fourth graders regularly give up their recess period to teach kindergarteners comprehension skills. When asked, the faculty can give numerous examples of Buffalo Creek children taking advantage of similar opportunities to teach each other.

Interconnected Teachers – A related indicator of school success is that Buffalo Creek teachers are not limited to dealing with problems by themselves. The isolated teacher who can rely on only her own resources to solve problems is a condition that has been well documented, particularly in large, impersonal school systems. Buffalo Creek teachers, however, expect to and actually do consult with each other, the principal, the staff and community resources as a regular, normal procedure. They are not evaluated as effective if they shut their doors and keep problems away from the principal.

The operating value in Buffalo Creek is not that it is a sign of weakness when a teacher seeks help, but that it is a natural expectation of a good teacher to seek the advice and cooperation of others. The operating value of the entire staff is, "We are in this together. We fail and succeed together."

As a result, teachers regularly seek the advice, ideas and suggestions of others, develop action plans, and then conduct evaluations of how well particular treatments work. This is no minor characteristic (i.e., merely item #8 on a list of school attributes). The teachers at Buffalo Creek do not *feel* isolated. When faced with what seems to be an insolvable problem, they tackle it rather than merely cope with it or sweep it under the rug. There is, as a result, a professional willingness by teachers to admit to problems, to seek and accept suggestions, to willingly try implementing treatments and to engage in evaluations. Teachers are

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> **The teachers perceive the society they have created in Buffalo Creek as communal: a place of shared values where 'everyone knows and cares about me just as I care about them.'**

not expected to suffer in silence, but to be proactive and team players.

The Faculty as Family – A clearly observable indicator of school success flows from how the teachers work together. The staff has created a community, almost a family, in the Buffalo Creek School. In many large districts, the only one who knows a teacher is even absent is the school secretary. And frequently, even the school secretary may not know if there is an automated system for teachers to call in sick and for the school to ring a substitute. The staff in this school derive personal as well as professional support from participating in the life of Buffalo Creek. The various adults who work in Buffalo Creek do not perceive of their school society as an *associational* one: that is, a work setting where strangers go to practice their profession. The teachers perceive the society they have created in Buffalo Creek as *communal*: a place of shared values where "everyone knows and cares about me just as I care about them." This communal dynamic creates a bonding similar to that found on a winning team or in an effective military or medical unit as participants realize that their best interests as individuals can be realized only by the success of the group. If a new teacher were to suggest to this faculty that they not work so hard, one of two things would happen. The newcomer would have to change and learn to wholeheartedly accept being socialized into the communal ideology that puts kids first, or start thinking about transferring out.

Teacher Attendance – In effective schools, children are seldom late or absent. Less obvious but of equal importance is the behavior of teachers and staff. It is now common in many school districts serving children in poverty for teachers to take off for "mental health" days. These are instances in which teachers are not ill, but take off the maximum number of days for which they can be paid. In some schools one-third of the faculty may be absent on a given day and if the teachers' contract permits one sick day every two weeks, the entire staff takes that full number.

In contrast, Buffalo Creek teachers have a low rate of absenteeism. Indeed, they frequently work when they are ill and are loathe to be away from their children. The operating norm at Buffalo Creek is to routinely place the needs of the children ahead of the teachers' convenience.

Teachers Control Curriculum – Teachers at Buffalo Creek do not report that they feel pressured to cover a certain amount of content each day or even each week. This means that teachers in the same grade level do not feel they are in a race with each other, or that they must cover a certain number of chapters in a book in a given time. What they do is set out some global or major points of where they want to be during the year and then discuss with each other where they are and why. An individual teacher can decide how much time to spend on a specific area of content.

This flexibility enables teachers with specific groups of students to decide how much time they will devote to studying particular amounts of subject matter. This is a form of curricular empowerment that permits each teacher to focus on her students' needs. If more or less time is needed, the teacher can make that determination. Rather than the curriculum serving as a force that controls teacher behavior, the teachers control which content will be emphasized for particular time periods. It is a truism of school success that the more curricular decisions made at the classroom level

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rather than at the district or state level, the more likely it becomes that the curriculum will actually be learned and not merely covered.

What this indicator means in practice is that the Buffalo Creek teachers begin with the annual curriculum goals in each subject area. They then use several long-term goals as markers or guidelines. Within these broad guidelines the teachers are free to decide how quickly to move their classes through each of the content areas. This aspect of teacher empowerment gives every teacher at Buffalo Creek a strong sense of personal input – even control – over what will be studied and for how long. Having this power contributes to the faculty's perception that they are professionals. Teachers without such decision-making authority (i.e., most teachers) report feeling they are written off as mere "how-to-do-it" people who merely follow the texts and implement the curriculum decisions of others.

> **...the more curricular decisions made at the classroom level rather than at the district or state level, the more likely it becomes that the curriculum will actually be learned and not merely covered.**

The Integration of Teacher Specialists – A daily indicator of school success is how the Buffalo Creek teachers work with and utilize specialist teachers in art, music, physical education and library. In this school, a class period or block of time with a specialist does not mean children stop what they are doing in order to sing or do some artwork while their teacher has a free period. The teachers *use* and integrate the specialists into their curriculum. Rather than have the children's studies interrupted to do some extraneous activity, the classroom teachers and specialists plan and work together. This means in practice that the content taught by a specialty teacher will fit with, enhance and extend the science, social studies, math or language arts being taught in the classroom. If the students are engaged in a particular science or social studies activity, for example, there are numerous ways in which special teachers may teach their subject matter concepts in ways that mesh with and enrich the classroom activities. In this way, children gain a sense of how learning seemingly diverse subjects can fit together and interrelate. This planning between teaching specialists and classroom teachers leads students to their curriculum in more integrated and holistic ways rather than as bits and pieces of unconnected knowledge.

Thematic Teaching – Related to and supporting this cooperative planning across disciplines is how most Buffalo Creek teachers deal with subject matter within their individual classrooms. They use thematic teaching; that is, they organize chunks of subject matter drawn from various fields to answer particular problems and questions that hold meaning for their students.

For example, the study of "electricity" can include science, math, reading, history, music, art and any number of other subjects. Beginning with particular themes that are relevant to the students, teachers may draw on various subject matters. For children in poverty who often lack the life experiences assumed by those who write textbooks and who assume there is a common body of knowledge shared by all 6-, 8- or 12-year-olds, thematic teaching seeks to provide the common experiences all children need to learn particular content.

This is a major difference between Buffalo Creek and the failing schools in most districts

serving children in poverty. Typically, poor children lagging behind in basic skills are subject to endless hours, days, weeks, months and years of "drill and kill" activities. Following directions and completing endless workshops (or computer screens) of "drill and kill" might be worth the price of student unhappiness if it worked. But it does not. In some cities, endless, meaningless skill drills have actually been endorsed by the school board as the official method of instruction to be followed. I refer to this as the pedagogy of poverty. No school board or educational experts would dare inflict such a methodology on advantaged or affluent children.

Thematic teaching requires trusting that teachers have the ability to interest children in almost everything they will need to learn and to keep drill to a minimum. Obviously, everything children need to learn is not necessarily pleasurable and cannot always be made fun. Thematic teaching permits dedicated, hardworking teachers to make a good portion of learning engaging and useful. The bottom line here is that inadequate teachers can be ordered to follow a regimen of drill, but they cannot be mandated to use thematic instruction. Such instruction requires great knowledge of content, pedagogy and the relationship skills needed to connect the children with key concepts in the curriculum. The teachers at Buffalo Creek have all been selected on the basis of having the relationship skills needed to work with children. They also are willing to learn whatever else they need in the areas of subject matter content and teaching strategies.

Teacher Control of Methods – A pedagogical indicator of success is related to the previous two. While teachers generally use thematic units and integrate their planning with specialists, they still retain some freedom over their teaching methods. Each teacher can determine how much direct instruction, cooperative learning, peer teaching, individualized or whole-group instruction she will use on a given day, or within a week or month. It is within each teacher's power and discretion to teach the whole class or a subgroup, to give a lesson using direct instruction, cooperative learning or some other method. Just as teachers are empowered to control the curriculum, each is empowered to control her pedagogy. As with almost everything else at Buffalo Creek, this is a shared topic of open discussion. Teachers are aware of and supportive of the similarities and differences in their preferred teaching styles. As they share what works for them, they are able to put advice and suggestions in context since they know how their colleagues teach.

Risk Takers, Not Change Agents – Another critically important indicator of school success is that the Buffalo Creek faculty are risk takers, not change agents. They do not begin by rejecting or seeking to alter state mandates or district policies. At the same time, they are willing to try anything reasonable to help children become engaged in learning and achieve. Effective teachers are focused on their children's learning. They devote whatever physical and psychic energy they have toward this goal. They do not become teachers to function as system changers. Their primary emphasis is on the children in their classes, not on organizations or district policies. They see themselves as working directly for the children and their families.

There are frequent times when the Buffalo Creek teachers do things differently, creatively or spur of the moment. They are risk takers and willing to try anything reasonable that will help their children. This is markedly different from perceiving themselves as change agents. These teachers are trying to make their children successful within the *existing* system. Again, the faculty and principal support one another in these efforts.

At one session in which the faculty was sharing things they had tried, one teacher reported how she took the legs off a table and the children seemed better able to access materials. She then discussed it with the children and they decided to take all the legs off all the tables. Other teachers immediately joined in with similar examples of things they did in their classrooms that helped the children work more effectively. The teachers never

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asked permission for taking these actions. They felt they had the decision-making authority to do whatever it takes to help their children learn. These examples of teacher actions were not necessarily major, but in typical school systems they could not have been made at the teacher's discretion and in many districts not at the discretion of the principal either. In the climate created at Buffalo Creek, however, "destroying school furniture" becomes a reasonable activity and one within the purview of the classroom teacher. For this reason, the term "risk taker" or "creative problem solver" is more appropriate than change agent.

Parents as Partners, Not Consumers – An important indicator of this school's success is the ways in which parents and caregivers are communicated with and involved. Parents and caregivers are not dealt with as merely the consumers of the school's services, but as genuine partners in the process of education. This approach is demonstrated by a school staff that does not define "parent relations" as informing the parents and caregivers of how their children are doing. Naturally, there are report cards and parent conferences in which teachers explain the children's progress in the various subjects. But the Buffalo Creek faculty interpret their primary role as working with and involving parents in ways that emphasize positive partnership. When asked specifically what they want of parents and caregivers, it is not uncommon for Buffalo Creek teachers to respond in terms of how much they can learn from parents. After all, they know their children better than the faculty does and can provide valuable information regarding their children's out-of-school lives, interests and activities. Teachers frequently seek out and use such information to help them connect the children with the school curriculum. In this approach teachers' contacts with parents and caregivers is a two-way street: teacher explaining children's progress; parents providing important information and insights about their children. Buffalo Creek teachers also involve parents as resources with particular knowledge and skills who can make valuable contributions to their classroom programs. Some parents can explain about their jobs, others their travel, war experiences or hobbies. The point is that when teachers sincerely believe they can learn important things from parents and caregivers, a new form of home-school relationship is developed in which parents feel respected rather than inferior.

It is not possible to overemphasize the importance of this approach when dealing with families in poverty. It is typical of parents and caregivers in poverty to feel they are failing at raising their children. The typical approach in poverty schools is to emphasize the several things parents should do to help their children do better in school. This merely makes the parents feel more defensive and alienated.

In the May issue: Sixteen additional indicators are identified that are evident at Buffalo Creek.

Editor's Note: Dr. Martin Haberman is the distinguished professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He can be reached at Enderis Hall, PO Box 413, Milwaukee, WI 53201; 404-229-4814.

Part 2 of 2

Final Part of a Series

Victory at Buffalo Creek *(continued)*

By Dr. Martin Haberman

(Editor's Note: This is the final in a three-part series concerning schools serving students from poverty. This article continues to describe the indicators that are evident in Buffalo Creek Elementary in Spring Branch ISD in Houston, which serves low-income Hispanic children.)

Service to Children and Their Families – A related indicator of school success is that the Buffalo Creek staff seeks to help its families as well as its children. In weekly, sometimes daily examples, the school principal and staff connect children and families with health and human service opportunities that they need. In a very real sense, Buffalo Creek regards the child *and* his/her family as its client.

In cases of neglect or abuse, the school administration and staff will devote the extra hours and effort needed to place a child or secure appropriate services. In a school serving the extreme poverty population that Buffalo Creek serves, this is an ongoing activity.

The children and their families need a broad range of health and human services. The school staff interprets its accountability for its children very broadly; that is, achieving the child's total well-being is regarded as a prerequisite to the child's doing well in school. Referrals to community agencies and then following-up to check on the resolution of children's problems is a common practice at Buffalo Creek. The children are not viewed as important only between the hours of 8 a.m. and 3 p.m., but as valuable all day, every day, including weekends and holidays.

Teachers Visit Homes – A straightforward indicator of this school's success is that the teachers are willing to make home visits. Further, most of the contacts whether in person, by telephone or in writing are positive. The Buffalo Creek faculty buy into the ideology that parents and caregivers respond to encouragement more than criticism and that such encouragements are most likely to support positive practices and reduce negative ones. It is not typical in poverty schools where teachers perceive neighborhoods as unsafe or uninviting to make home visits a common practice.

Teachers Accept Accountability – A critical indicator of this school is how the staff explains the causes of children being at-risk and how accountable they as teachers feel for ameliorating these conditions. When asked about the causes of their children's problems in school, the faculty cites their children's limited life experiences and language problems.

Such responses are typical of teaching staffs in poverty schools serving Hispanic children. Buffalo Creek teachers, however, do not regard such explanations as *excuses* for less learning or lowered expectations.

Indeed, they talk about "what we can do about counteracting condition X, Y or Z." They demonstrate a strong willingness as well as an expectation that they as teachers should be held accountable for their children's learning. They do not use their children's lack of background experiences in content areas which give advantaged children a head start in school as a way of avoiding accountability.

As one observes the school and its ongoing curriculum, it is clear that the teachers actually seek to provide the life experiences they feel their children need. Field trips, resource people, special materials and numerous other activities demonstrate that the teachers feel it is part of their job to provide whatever background experiences they feel the children lack and which are within the power of the school to provide.

In cases where this is not possible, vicarious experiences (e.g., video or computer programs) are utilized. Again, it is typical in poverty schools for teachers to justify and rationalize their lack of accountability on the basis of their children's limited life experiences. The Buffalo Creek faculty do the reverse. They seek to provide these experiences and hold themselves accountable for doing so.

Principal Protects Teachers' Time and Energy – The role of the principal, not in theory but as practiced, is an important indicator of this school's success. Specifically, the behavioral demonstration of what the principal does in this regard is that she absorbs stress. She does not pass on the demands of the state or the district to the teachers. She protects the teachers from the continuous paper flow, deadlines and demands for reports which she receives. To a great extent she meets the demands of the bureaucracy in ways which do not break into teachers' time or their work with the children.

The teachers at Buffalo Creek have a general notion of the fact that the principal is doing this, but because they are protected by the principal, they cannot always give details. The principal can give numerous examples of how she protects teachers' time and energy in order to allow them to concentrate on teaching and children.

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When it is not possible to avoid involving the teachers in doing some paper work, there is a clear effort to find the most efficient ways in which to get the task accomplished. Buffalo Creek is not a school in which teachers' mailboxes are constantly crammed with things that teachers must set aside their teaching to accomplish.

Interruptions Are Minimal – In action research studies with practicing urban teachers, it is not unusual for them to report up to 125 interruptions per week. The squawk box, children coming late, notes from the office or other teachers, and students in their room making constant requests to leave are the norm.

On a verbal level, school staff will claim that the children's learning time comes first. In practice, however, many schools do the reverse. It is not uncommon to observe teachers who do not begin the lesson until 15-20 minutes into the period and who never get to complete the lesson in the way they had planned. Anyone in the office, school safety aides or visitors feel it is permissible to interrupt a classroom. After all, it is just a brief interruption and the teacher and children are assumed to have all day together.

This is not a common pattern in Buffalo Creek. The stated value that learning time is to be protected is also the practice. There are rarely announcements over the intercom and children's coming and going for extraneous reasons are kept to a minimum. Children in the halls are rare. The common expectation is that while this is a pleasant, friendly place, it is also a place of work where people are busy and purposeful.

Schools characterized by constant interruptions cannot possibly achieve the climate of Buffalo Creek. Here the work ethic is clearly demonstrated by the great amount of on-task time of the staff and the children.

Faculty Has Not Made Tests the Curriculum – Buffalo Creek teachers are concerned about the mandated tests their children must take, but they do not let these tests control the school curriculum. In many failing schools, the faculty has given up and has substituted the tests for the curriculum. They then follow a drill-and-kill format trying to teach the children how to respond to similar questions and formats to those on the tests. Unfortunately, children do not learn this way and the test scores don't improve.

"The school staff interprets its accountability for its children very broadly; that is, achieving the child's total well-being is regarded as prerequisite to the child's doing well in school."

The faculty at Buffalo Creek is well aware of the fact that the first criterion which will be used in evaluating the school, the children and themselves will be the achievement scores. Nevertheless, they hold their anxieties in check and continue to offer a curriculum that is relevant to their children's lives, that will engage the children and that includes what the teachers believe are the most important concepts and skills to be learned. This takes both courage and commitment on the part of the faculty.

Bombarded as they are by state and district mandates, they hold fast to the idea that the curriculum must connect with their children's lives and that the children must derive personal meaning from their learning. The faculty are able to resist the pressures of the test mania which engulfs them for several reasons: they each derive strong support as members of a communal faculty and they have a principal who is willing to risk that if the teachers really teach the knowledge of most worth, the test scores will take care of themselves. They now have lived through their first year and have generated good test scores after having taught their way and not drilled for the tests; this is a great reward for the faculty.

A Pre-College Curriculum for All – Growing out of their commitment to teaching in accordance with how children learn, the teachers continue to offer the curriculum in terms of its stated objectives rather than as test items.

What this means in practice is that the teachers' classroom programs are an amalgam of key concepts from the various subject matters taught in thematic units. Basic skills are taught as part of and in addition to these units. The success of this approach, as perceived by the teachers and demonstrated by the test scores, leads the whole faculty to hold high aspirations for their children. As the children experience success from their achievements, the school program itself becomes a continuous source of encouragement and reward for them.

In effect, there is a positive cycle in motion: the fact that the teachers keep finding legitimate ways for the children to be successful leads the children to try even harder tasks which, in turn, leads to the accomplishment of more difficult learning. Observing the positive cycle they have set in motion, the teachers at Buffalo Creek seriously expect that the children they teach will all be able to go to college if they so choose. They see the children as future successes not barred from options because of school failure. I know of no school serving this population of children in which the faculty as a group expects that their

children will get to college and beyond. It is as if the assumed expectations of a faculty in an advantaged suburb have been transplanted into a poverty school. This is a remarkable condition because it not only reflects the expectations of the Buffalo Creek faculty, but the reality of what they see themselves and their children accomplishing every day.

Administrative "With-it-ness" – Every good administrator knows what's going on in the school. In Buffalo Creek, the principal knows what's going on in every classroom. She is even aware of what is happening to a large number of individual children; what they are doing, their problems and victories, and how they feel today. But this level of awareness is characteristic of many administrators, including some who are heading unsuccessful schools.

What's happening in Buffalo Creek is that administrative sensitivity and awareness are only the beginning of the principal's leadership. The critical question is, "What does the principal *do* with all the input and firsthand knowledge she gains from being in the classrooms and corridors?"

In most cases, she takes little or no overt action and serves as a source of encouragement and support. This builds a sense of empowerment among staff who feel that they not only can solve most of their problems, but that the principal is aware of and appreciates what they are doing.

In other instances, however, the principal helps resolve problems by working on the setting or conditions of work and allowing the teachers and children to feel they have taken care of things themselves. By providing materials, a part-time aide, a free period or a piece of equipment, or by helping with special events, the principal works on improving the conditions under which teachers work rather than trying to change the teachers directly. Again, teachers feel they have resolved their own problems – and they have – but the principal's role in altering the setting has made these teacher resolutions possible.

In addition to not interfering directly but changing the conditions under which teachers work, this principal uses her knowledge of what is going on in the school in other ways:

- She is willing and able to deal with emergencies;
- She communicates thoroughly and well so that everyone feels they know what is going on; and
- She connects the school to health, human service and law enforcement agencies.

None of these functions could be performed if the principal did not maintain a thorough ongoing knowledge of what is happening to the teachers and children in the school. The lesson of leadership here is that because everyone in the Buffalo Creek school community (staff, teachers, children, parents, community, central office staff) knows that this principal has a high level of awareness, they control, modify and shape their own behavior in ways they would never do if they thought she was less knowledgeable. Knowing she knows what faculty are doing, some teachers are motivated by a need for approval, others by a fear of failure, some by a need to demonstrate independence, and others by a desire to share good work. While the motivations of the faculty and staff vary, it is clear that the principal's deep knowledge and sensitivity exerts a powerful leadership impact whether she takes any direct action or not.

Consensual Decision Making – The question that predicts most about teacher morale in a school is, "How are disagreements handled?" In Buffalo Creek, staff are not shy about expressing their concerns. This means that teachers feel no pressure to stifle themselves and simply cope with things they may not understand or agree with. They do what is typical in communal groups. They talk things over until they reach consensus. This requires time for sharing, understanding others' points of view and considering options together. The principal may participate in these discussions, but her voice does not override any others.

This cooperative behavior is not much different from what happens in a supportive family. Teachers honestly want to know why colleagues may agree or disagree with them because their professional self-concept is derived from these "family" members. As teachers explain their ideas to each other, they are doing so to colleagues who care about them as well as the children.

In such a situation, each teacher has a built-in reward for suggesting things that will keep meeting children's needs as the ultimate value to be preserved. Once an individual teacher feels respected and appreciated, s/he wants to remain a part of the group providing these rewards. In this way, the group's approval exerts some influence over each member's behavior. And in groups like Buffalo Creek where people care about each other, they seek to reach consensus because they want every member of the group to feel comfortable and enhanced. It would be unimaginable for this faculty to simply follow orders from the principal or to take formal votes in which the majority wins and the minority loses. A communal group is like a family in which the participants know they will remain linked and committed to one another beyond any immediate decision. They also know that the total school and each of them as individuals can continue to succeed only if they all succeed. This recognition impels them to constantly seek consensus and move ahead as a group. In effect, the unit of analysis is the school, not the individual teacher.

Climate of Teacher Encouragement – There is much discussion and analysis about what motivates people and controls their behavior as professional practitioners. Learning theory focuses on rewards which can readily be observed: power, status, money. One of the most powerful and least understood motivators is the absence of punishment. Much of the behavior in the workplace is influenced by what appears to be no reward but which in reality is a great one for many people: the absence of criticism.

In teaching there is little consensus on

what constitutes goodness, but great agreement on poor teaching. For example, denigrating children or deprecating their culture are universally agreed upon as undesirable. Specific teaching behaviors such as yelling, not providing any positive feedback, or not listening to children are readily agreed upon as negative acts of teaching. In any school, the faculty share a greater body of knowledge regarding the things they should not be doing than what they can agree on as positive acts. For teachers in typical schools, it becomes a source of tacit approval and motivation to avoid the criticism of peers. The typical school environment supports teacher isolation so that teachers who do perform negative acts of teaching may perform them in private. It is also common in many school environments for teachers to not be rewarded for sharing positive achievements. One teacher's positive accomplishments may be met with feelings of jealousy or perceived as threats by other teachers who cannot demonstrate such achievements. As a result, teaching has been a profession most teachers prefer to practice in private. Recently, with the growth of team teaching, this professional credo is starting to be challenged, but it is difficult to move teachers into risking open practice.

In Buffalo Creek, teachers practice in the open. Everyone knows what others are doing. Much recognition, praise and encouragement are mutually shared by the teaching staff. What makes this situation different and special, however, is more than its openness. *These teachers work in the absence of threat and without a fear of punishment for having tried something and failed.* They work proactively seeking to do better because they will not be criticized for efforts that may prove to be less than perfect or even successful. In this environment, the rewards do not come to those who do little in order to avoid criticism. Recognition and approval are given teachers for all the extra efforts they expend and for all the special things they try. For teachers as well as children, effort is regarded as the best explanation of success. In opposition to typical school climates, the teacher who would feel most threatened and unrewarded in Buffalo Creek would be a teacher whose motivation was to not rock any boats, to not risk anything, to never discuss what she is trying in her classroom, and to simply avoid criticism.

The Children Feel Needed – The children feel it is a special privilege to be in this school. The basic reason they feel it is a special place is that the staff believes it is. The process by which teachers accomplish this is by making each student feel needed. "We couldn't do this project without you" is, in essence, the message sent the children. In many schools serving children in poverty, the teachers continuously give students the message that "you are not needed here unless you shape up and stop interfering with my teaching." In such typical situations, it is the teacher's classroom and the teacher's work that is the focus of concern. In Buffalo Creek it is the children and their work that is the focus. By using a high degree of teaming, cooperation and peer assistance, the feeling that permeates the student body is that their contributions and efforts are needed to make things work.

The Tribes management program and the use of thematic teaching units also serve to make the children interdependent and places them in mutual roles rather than in the position of isolated learners. The impact of these practices on the total school environment is the widespread belief among the children that Buffalo Creek is *their* school, that it exists for *their* benefit and that it wouldn't work except for *their* efforts.

Teachers are Students of Learning – There is an ongoing interest among the teachers regarding how their children learn and what conditions in this particular school can best facilitate it. The staff does not view learning as a course they took once at the university. They regularly think about and discuss with each other the processes by which their children are learning.

This interest focuses on two attributes: the children's ages and their Hispanic background. The teachers regard their students as children first. They seek better and more effective ways of increasing the learning of the particular pupils in their classrooms. At the same time, the teachers are extremely sensitive to the fact that these are also Hispanic children living in this particular area who have had specific kinds of life experiences and missed others.

The teachers recognize their quest as a series of questions and concerns that they will ask themselves and each other for as long as they remain in Buffalo Creek. "What more can I learn about how my kids learn, about what interferes with their learning, and what makes it easier for them?"

This is a critical and extremely valuable set of questions for a teaching staff to be asking itself. It shows that they perceive themselves as learners. It indicates that they expect to do better each year and not have one year of experience over and over. Most of all, the questions of these teachers regarding how their specific children learn best is that they see the learning process as driving the curriculum and their teaching practices. In typical schools, the faculty seeks to implement their favorite teaching strategies and the required curriculum without regard for how their children learn best. The operating norm in Buffalo Creek is the reverse; as teachers gain insight into how their children learn best, they adjust their teaching methods and connect the curriculum to the children's learning.

Teachers Act as if They are Important – The teaching staff in Buffalo Creek seems to have many individuals with high positive self-concepts. The total faculty appears to be a group of confident, optimistic, "can-do" people. It is typical in schools serving children in poverty for teachers to feel pessimistic about all the negative life conditions faced by the children over which the school has no control. As a result, it is common for teachers of children in poverty to feel there is little they can do to turn life around for their students. Such perceptions make many teachers feel helpless and, therefore, unaccountable.

The general feeling communicated by the Buffalo Creek faculty is one of opti-

mism. They feel they are helping their children become successful learners and that they are thereby having a powerful impact on their children's lives. Success sets up a cycle whereby teachers feel even more helpful, which in turn helps lead them to more success. When teachers such as those in Buffalo Creek enjoy a high self-concept about themselves and their work, it is inevitable they will model these feelings of efficacy to the students. And because "it takes somebodys to make somebodys; nobody's don't make somebodys," the teachers' feelings about themselves exert a powerful influence on the children's self-concepts.

Children Reluctant to Go Home – A solid indicator of a successful school is that on any given day many of the children do not want to go home. They want to finish some work or they simply want to stay in an environment they find pleasant. Many of the children feel the teachers want them there; others simply enjoy being with their friends. For the children in Buffalo Creek, school is an inviting, engaging place. They arrive with enthusiasm and leave with reluctance.

Faculty Planning Includes Out-of-School Objectives – While it is typical for school faculties to feel helpless in counteracting many of the debilitating life conditions their children encounter in the school community, the Buffalo Creek faculty feel they should at least try. One indicator of this commitment is the faculty developing an anti-gang plan. There is a low-income housing complex where many of the children live. This housing area is known for recruiting young children into gangs. The Buffalo Creek faculty believe that their school plan should include some means for counteracting such activity. When a school staff believes it should make this kind of effort, it indicates first that they feel accountable for their children's total well-being and second, that they feel important enough to have an impact on conditions which occur outside of school.

Children Expect Teachers to be Good – Teaching in Buffalo Creek is made more challenging by the fact that there are so many good teachers. Children have come to expect that teachers will care about them, seek to generate their interest, try to connect the curriculum to their lives, provide engaging materials, use a wide range of equipment, employ exciting teaching strategies and evaluate them fairly. In more typical schools, the few really good teachers receive strong student cooperation because most of the other teachers do not treat children in these ways.

In Buffalo Creek where outstanding teaching has become the norm, the children have come to expect it. As a result, there is a constant form of professional pressure on the teachers to keep up a very high level of superior teaching. They must continue to plan, seek out creative activities and work hard since last week's or even yesterday's successes will not be sufficient. Teaching is an activity that requires each new day to stand on its own and to generate success all over again. In a place where all the teachers are caring and respectful of children, the children come to regard such treatment as their right. In a very real sense, it becomes a great challenge to remain a good teacher in Buffalo Creek because everyone on the staff is constantly doing things which in typical schools would be viewed as exceptional. What an observer senses in Buffalo Creek is that in spite of the faculty being an excellent one, they must work exceptionally hard just to keep up with the high level of expectations they have set for themselves. Fortunately, it is a communal group and rather than compete, they cooperate and help each other meet the constant pressure to maintain a high standard of teacher performance.

Pervasive Bilingual Program – Most of the faculty are Anglos but over half, including the principal, are bilingual. This means that the bilingual program at Buffalo Creek actually goes on all day in informal ways as well as in formal class periods. As in all bilingual programs, the ultimate goal is to make all the children reach a level in standard English which will enable him/her to be an independent learner working at grade level in English in all subject areas. Getting there is the great challenge. In Buffalo Creek, a teaming between bilingual and ESL teachers allows them to use bilingual methods throughout the day in all subject matters and activities. This ensures that students become proficient in English. There is a definite feeling of comfort and competence which is communicated by the faculty because of their own acceptance and/or proficiency in both languages.

A Final Note – It is certain that there are more than these 33 indicators of success in the Buffalo Creek School. State laws, district policies, financial support, the curriculum and many other things contribute to the school's success. But the primary explanation for what makes Buffalo Creek an outstanding school is to be found in the quality of its teachers and principal. While it is true that the staff has much content knowledge (including Spanish and ESL) and much know-how regarding teaching strategies, it must be remembered that faculty in many other poverty schools who may know as much as the Buffalo Creek teachers have created only mediocre or failing schools.

What these teachers (and principal) have is in addition to subject matter knowledge and teaching know-how. The Buffalo Creek staff's special expertise has three themes. First, every one of the success indicators is primarily a function of the staff's ability to relate to the children, the parents and each other. Second, the staff shares a common ideology of why the school exists, what is supposed to happen to the children, and their role as teachers (principal) to make it happen. Third, the Buffalo Creek staff is gifted at relationship skills – and this is key. Studying Buffalo Creek leads to the conclusion that children in poverty must have teachers who can connect with them. The teachers' desire and ability to want to live with the children all day, every day, is prerequisite to the children's learning.

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